

LIFE / SOCIETY &amp; CULTURE / SOCIAL ISSUES

# Serial killers: Some say they're white, others say black

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Funeral for 4 of the 7 victims of Toulouse, France school shootings, 2012, held in Jerusalem

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The authors of some of the primary works on serial [murder](#) have been so vague in their reports of their own findings that either they, or subsequent reviewers, can say whatever they wish about those findings. Consequently, these subsequent reports may vary or they may all follow the same ideological positions. This vagueness or changing of original findings occurs particularly in two areas: the existence of child abuse and the issue of race. It is probable that these two areas are related and that the vagueness or changing findings are a result of the authors' attempts to adhere to the world view, or "paradigm," known by criminologists as the (Marvin) [Wolfgang](#) Model of Homicide Research.

In this world view, almost all homicides are "crimes of passion" committed by nonwhites, primarily African Americans, whose values are derived from their "subculture of violence." The dominant (white, middle-class) culture, on the other hand, is seen as diametrically opposed to violence and living in a culture of nonviolence. Wolfgang (1958, with Ferracuti, 1967) believed that there was little chance of an increase in homicides by members of this culture, no matter what the criminal justice system did or whether their murders were punished. There were only two types of murders they committed anyway, and both are rare: murders involving psychopathology (including those without apparent motives) and premeditated or carefully planned, rational murders. Therefore, criminology can safely ignore homicides committed by members of the dominant culture. The field should focus instead on the more numerous murders committed by poor blacks (1967). Criminologists essentially said, "yes sir," and then went full-steam ahead for the next 50 years - without ever testing the subcultural theory.

**Kuhn's** (1962) notion of paradigms only applied to natural sciences. At one time criminologists realized their traditions, roots and methods were not those of history or social sciences (see, e.g. **Vold**, 1958; **Sutherland & Cressey**, 1978). These writers further believed that criminology was incapable of progress without joining the behavioral sciences. Criminologists who confuse psychodynamics and empirical psychology are those whose works are most vague. They include **Hickey** (1991), the FBI and associates, **Ressler, Burgess and Douglas** (1988) (in contrast to later works by **Ressler & Shachtman**, 1992) and, to a lesser extent, Leyton (1986). Leading scholars should be called to task for misrepresenting their work and/or making it so easy for others to do so by the vagueness with which they report it and the failure to correct reviewers. Hickey's work is the most problematic for he takes one of the most respected psychologists in the world and, ignoring the fact that **Albert Bandura's** work was in the area of mass media and learning, describes it as psychodynamic and focused on early childhood.

Consider, for instance, an early review of the literature by **Cluff, Hunter and Hinch** (1997, pg. 303), particularly concerning studies by Hickey and Leyton. The reviewers report that such scholars have described serial killers in terms that suggest linkages between serial murder and social structural causes, such as class. Cluff, Hunter *et al* find that Leyton's thesis about serial killers sounds much like typical, conventional murderers (e.g. those Wolfgang, 1958, described) who are minorities from poor and poorly educated homes. Both male and female serial killers share with each other and with traditional murderers "a sense of powerlessness derived from their socioeconomic situations." They cite Hickey, Leyton, and other sources for the view that males and female serial murderers "kill as a vehicle for gaining a measure of power." The distinctions between rich and poor, black and white, and having or not having power are all lost because of the reviewers' focus on *feeling* powerless.

The following statements show what Hickey (1991) actually wrote:

"Social structural theories offer cogent explanations for many types of crime except for serial murder" (Hickey, pg. 88).

"Generally, serial murderers do not belong to a racial or ethnic minority, and do not appear to be particularly motivated, although there are a few exceptions, by social or financial gain" (Hickey, 1991, pg. 88).

Further, Hickey (1991) reported that 85 percent of male serial killers in the U.S. from the mid-1800s through 1988 were white and 97 percent of females were white. And, among the latter, two thirds were classified as being in the middle to upper-class social hierarchies. Apparently, members of the dominant culture *can* and *do* increase the numbers of their killings: Hickey reports a sharp increase since 1970 in female serial killings and more male serial killings recorded in the 13-year period between 1975 and 1988 than during any previous span of 25 years.

What's more, according to Hickey (1991, pg. 122), female serial killers did not suffer more childhood traumas than other criminals or even noncriminal populations. Their primary motive appears to have been financial security, but they also killed for "revenge, enjoyment and sexual stimulation." And, despite the absence of psychosis, Hickey spends a page quoting Wolfgang and Ferracuti's (1967) statement about middle and upper-class murderers. "This explanation may well fit the two thirds of females" in the middle and upper classes, Hickey says. One wonders precisely how Wolfgang was still correct in his assessment? Hickey never admits that any serial killers engage in premeditated murders. But he does provide them with an abundance of excuses, unseen stresses and untestable abuses.

Leyton (1986, pg. 311) is far more forthright when he said that "these killers were almost never drawn from the ranks of the truly oppressed: there are few women, blacks, or native Americans in our files." However, Leyton (1986) departs from his social-historical theory of multiple murder to tack on a page at the end of his book that offers his subjects a form of the so-called abuse excuse. He claims that many multiple murderers have suffered from at least one of four following "pressures within the natal family" (pg. 315): adoption, illegitimacy, institutionalization or a mother who marries three or more times. But what kind of an excuse is this, when they share this characteristic with up to 20 percent of the general population? It is hardly a sad story, this notion by Leyton of "pressures," which, in any event, he fails to explain in his case histories so that we understand how these "pressures" created the multiple murderer.

## SUGGESTED LINKS

- [How profiling was made to seem effective, how our minds encouraged that effort](#)
- [Why profiling is unlikely to work](#)

- **Profiling: An obstacle to curtailing serial murder**
- **Curtailing serial murder: Modus Operandi and calling cards**
- **Ways to curtail serial murder: Considering normal human beings who kill**



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